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Robert E. Adamowski
13232 NE 3th Street
Bellevue, WA 98005

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OFFICE OF PETITIONS

In re Patent No. 5,980,902 :
Issued: November 9, 1999 :
Application No.: 09/048,966 : ON PETITION
Filing Date: March 26, 1998 :
Attorney Docket No. 53000/1001 :

This is in response to the "Response to Request for Information" filed November 22, 2010, and a decision on the petition under 37 CFR 1.378(b), filed May 24, 2010, to reinstate the above-cited patent.

The petition is **dismissed**.

The patent issued November 9, 1999. The 7.5 year maintenance fee could have been paid from May 24, 2006, through November 24, 2006, or with a surcharge, as authorized by 37 CFR 1.20(h), during the period from November 25, 2006, to November 9, 2007. Petitioner did not do so. Accordingly, the patent expired at midnight on November 9, 2007.

A grantable petition under 37 CFR 1.378(b) must be accompanied by a showing to the satisfaction of the Commissioner that the entire delay in paying the required maintenance fee from the due date for the fee until the filing of a grantable petition pursuant to this paragraph was unavoidable. The showing of record is not sufficient to establish to the satisfaction of the Commissioner that the delay was unavoidable within the meaning of 37 CFR 1.378(b).

Opinion

Petitioner must establish that petitioner treated the patent the same as a reasonable and prudent person would treat his or her most important business.

The general standard applied by the Office requires petitioner to establish that petitioner treated the patent the same as a reasonable and prudent person would treat his or her most important business.¹

¹The Commissioner is responsible for determining the standard for unavoidable delay and for applying that standard. 35 U.S.C. 41(c)(1) states, "The Commissioner may accept the payment of any maintenance fee . . . at any time . . . if the delay is shown *to the satisfaction of the Commissioner* to have been unavoidable." (emphasis added).

"In the specialized field of patent law, . . . the Commissioner of Patent and Trademarks is primarily responsible for the application and enforcement of the various narrow and technical statutory and regulatory provisions. His interpretation of those provisions is entitled to considerable deference." Rydeen v. Quigg, 748 F. Supp. 900, 904, 16 U.S.P.Q.2d (BNA) 1876 (D.D.C. 1990), aff'd without opinion Rule 36), 937 F.2d 623 (Fed Cir. 1991) (citing Morganroth v. Quigg, 885 F.2d 843, 848, 12 U.S.P.Q.2d agencies' interpretation of a statute it administers is entitled to deference"); see also Chevron U.S.A. Inc. v. Natural Resources Defense Council, Inc., 467 U.S. 837, 844, 81 L. Ed. 694, 104 S. Ct. 2778 (1984) ("if the statute is silent or

However, “[t]he question of whether an applicant’s delay in prosecuting an application was unavoidable [will] be decided on a case-by-case basis, taking all of the facts and circumstances into account.”² Nonawareness of the content of, or misunderstanding of PTO statutes, PTO rules, the MPEP, or the Official Gazette notices does not constitute unavoidable delay.³ The statute requires a “showing” by petitioner, therefore; petitioner has the burden of proof. The decision will be based solely on the written, administrative record in existence. It is not enough that the delay was unavoidable; petitioner must prove that the delay was unavoidable. A petition will not be granted if petitioner provides insufficient evidence to “show” that the delay was unavoidable.

Petitioner is responsible for possessing knowledge of the need to pay maintenance fees and the due dates for such fees, Petitioner is responsible for instituting a reliable docketing system to remind him or her when maintenance fees become due.

Petitioner is responsible for having knowledge of the need to pay maintenance fees and knowing when the fees are due.⁴ The Office has no duty to notify a patentee of the requirement to pay maintenance fees or to notify patentee when a maintenance fee is due.⁵ Even if the Office were required to provide notice to

ambiguous with respect to the specific issue, the question for the court is whether the agency’s answer is based on a permissible construction of the statute.”))

“The critical phrase ‘unless it be shown to the satisfaction of the Commissioner that such delay was unavoidable’ has remained unchanged since first enacted in 1861.” Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 977 (D.C. Cir. 1982). The standard for “unavoidable” delay for reinstating a patent is the same as the unavoidable standard for reviving an application. See Ray v. Lehman, 55 F. 3d 606, 608-609, 34 U.S.P.Q.2d (BNA) 1786, 1781 (Fed Cir. 1995) (Citing In re patent No. 4,409,763, 7 U.S.P.Q.2d BNA) 1798, 1800 (Comm’r Pat. 1990; Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F. 2d 533, 538, 213 U.S.P. Q. (BNA) 977 (D.C. Cir. 1982). The court in In re Mattullath, accepted the standard which had been proposed by Commissioner Hall which “requires no more or greater care or diligence than is generally used and observed by prudent and careful men in relation to their most important business.” In re Mattullath, 38 App. D.C. 497, 514-515 (1912) (quoting Ex parte Pratt, 1887 Dec. Comm’r Pat 31, 32-33 (1887)).

²Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 977 (1982).

³See Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F. 2d 533, 538, 213 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 977 (Fed. Cir. 1982) (citing Potter v. Dann, 201 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 574 (D.D.C. 1978) for the proposition that counsel’s nonawareness of PTO rules does not constitute “unavoidable” delay)); Vincent v. Mossinghoff, 1985 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 23119, 13, 230 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 621 (D.D.C. 1985) (plaintiffs, through their counsel’s action, or their own, must be held responsible for having noted the MPEP section and Official Gazette notices expressly stating that the certified mailing procedures outlined in 37 CFR 1.8(a) do not apply to continuation applications.) (Emphasis added).

⁴Nonawareness of PTO statutes, PTO rules, the MPEP, or Official Gazette notices, which state maintenance fee amounts and dates they are due does not constitute unavoidable delay. See Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 977 (Fed. Cir. 1982) (citing Potter v. Dann, 201 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 574 (D.D.C. 1978) for the proposition that counsel’s nonawareness of PTO rules does not constitute “unavoidable” delay)); Vincent v. Mossinghoff, 1985 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 23119, 13, 230 U.S.P.Q. (BNA) 621 (D.D.C. 1985) (Plaintiffs, through their counsel’s actions, or their own must be held responsible for having noted the MPEP section and Official Gazette notices expressly stating that the certified mailing procedures outlined in 37 CFR 1.8(a) do not apply to continuation applications.) (Emphasis added).

Petitioner must act as a reasonable and prudent person in relation to his most important business. Upon obtaining the patent, a reasonable and prudent person, in relation to his most important business, would become familiar with the legal requirements of that business, in this case, the requirement to pay maintenance fees. In addition, a reasonable and prudent individual would read the patent itself and thereby become aware of the need to pay maintenance fees and the fact that such fee amounts are sometimes changed by law or regulation.

⁵Congress expressly conditioned §§ 133 and 151 [of the United States Code] on a specific type of notice, while no such notice requirements are written into § 41(c) . . . [T]he Commissioner’s no timely-notice interpretation.” Ray v. Comer, 1994 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 21478, 8-9 (1994), *aff’d on other grounds* Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 34 USPQ2d 1786 (Fed. Cir. 1995) (Citing

applicant of the existence of maintenance fee requirements, such notice is provided by the patent itself.⁶

A reasonable and prudent person, aware of the existence of maintenance fees, would not rely on maintenance fee reminders or on memory to remind him or her when payments would fall due several years in the future. Instead, such an individual would implement a reliable and trustworthy tracking system to keep track of the relevant dates.⁷ The individual would also take steps to ensure that the patent information was correctly entered into the tracking system.

Application of the unavoidable standard to the present facts

In the instant petition, petitioner argues that the above-cited patent should be reinstated because the delay in paying the 7.5-year maintenance fee was unavoidable due to docketing and clerical errors that occurred between Mr. Robert Adamowski and Mr. Wil Claus, President and Chief Financial Officer of the assignee, respectively. Petitioner states that the due date for the 7.5 year maintenance fee for the subject patent was not properly entered on petitioner's calendar.

The petitioner's argument and statements have been considered, but are not persuasive as petitioner has not made the "showing" that is required to satisfy the requirements of 37 CFR 1.378(b). Section 2590 of the MPEP indicates that:

... an error in a docketing system could possibly result in a finding that a delay in payment was unavoidable if it were shown that reasonable care was exercised in designing and operating the system and that the patentee took reasonable steps to ensure that the patent was entered into the system to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee.

Rydeen v. Quigg, 748 F. Supp. 900, 905 (1990), Chevron U.S.A. Inc. v. Natural Resources Defense Council, Inc., 467 U.S. 837, 81 L. ed. 2d 694, 104 S. Ct. 2778 (1984)). "The Court concludes as it did in Rydeen, that as a constitutional matter, 'plaintiff' was not entitled to any notice beyond publication of the statute." Id. at 3 (citing Rydeen v. Quigg, 748 F. Supp. at 906, Texaco v. Short, 454 U.S. 516, 536, 70 L. Ed. 2d 738, 102 S. Ct. 781 (1982)).

The Patent Office, as a courtesy tries to send maintenance fee reminders and notices of patent expiration to the address of record. However, the failure to receive the reminder notice, and the lack of knowledge of the requirement to pay the maintenance fee, will not shift the burden of monitoring the time for paying a maintenance fee from the patentee to the Office. See MPEP 2575, 2540, 2590. Petitioner does not have a right to a personalized notice that this patent will expire if a certain maintenance fee is not paid, as the publication of the statute was sufficient notice. See Rydeen v. Quigg, 748 F. Supp. 900, 907 (1990). the ultimate responsibility for keeping track of maintenance fee states lies with the patentee, not the USPTO. Since the mailing of Notices by the Office is completely discretionary and not a requirement imposed by Congress, accepting an argument that failure to receive a Notice is unavoidable delay would result in all delays being unavoidable should the Office discontinue the policy. All petitions could allege non-receipt of the reminder, and therefore all petitions could be granted. This was clearly not the intent of Congress in the creation of the unavoidable standard.

⁶See Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 610; 34 USPQ2d 1786, 1789 (Fed. Cir. 1995). The Letters of Patent contain a Maintenance Fee Notice that warns that the patent may be subject to maintenance fees if the application was filed on or after December 12, 1980. While it is unclear as to who was and is in actual possession of the patent, petitioner's failure to read the Notice does not vitiate the Notice, nor does the delay resulting from such failure to read the Notice establish unavoidable delay.

⁷ 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) precludes acceptance of a late maintenance fee for a patent unless a petitioner can demonstrate that steps were in place to monitor the maintenance fee. The federal Circuit has specifically upheld the validity of this regulation. Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 609; 34 USPQ2d (BNA) 1786 (Fed.Cir. 1995). In Ray v. Lehman, petitioner claimed that he had not known of the existence of the maintenance fees and therefore had no steps in place to pay such fees. The petitioner therefore argues that the PTO's regulation, 37 CFR 1.37(b)(3), supra, arguing that it 'creates a burden that goes well beyond what is reasonably prudent.' We disagree, The PTO's regulation merely sets forth how one is to prove that he was reasonably prudent, i.e., by showing what steps he took to ensure that the maintenance fee would be timely paid, and the steps taken in seeking to reinstate the patent. We do not see these requirements additional to proving unavoidable delay, but as the very elements of unavoidable delay." Id.

Any renewed petition under 37 CFR 1.378(e) filed must provide the following, accordingly:

- Additional information regarding the kind of docketing system the assignee used, its use in the industry, and why it is a reliable system.
- Explain the process used to enter petitioner's data into the docketing system, more specifically, what data integrity and error checks were used in the process.
- Explain, in detail, the tests conducted to verify the completeness and reliability of the data entered into the database and provide statements from employees who were involved with the data entry.
- Explain how the data entry was accomplished and how the error may have occurred.

It is also noted that there appears to be some sort of the clerical error in entry of the due dates for the maintenance fee for the subject patent. Further to this point, Section 711.03(c)(2) provides, in pertinent part that:

In addition, decisions on revival are made on a "case-by-case basis, taking all the facts and circumstances into account." *Smith v. Mossinghoff*, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 USPQ 977, 982 (D.C. Cir. 1982). Finally, a petition cannot be granted where a petitioner has failed to meet his or her burden of establishing that the delay was "unavoidable." *Haines v. Quigg*, 673 F. Supp. 314, 316-17, 5 USPQ2d 1130, 1131-32 (N.D. Ind. 1987).

A delay resulting from an error (e.g., a docketing error) on the part of an employee in the performance of a clerical function may provide the basis for a showing of "unavoidable" delay, provided it is shown that:

- (A) the error was the cause of the delay at issue;
- (B) there was in place a business routine for performing the clerical function that could reasonably be relied upon to avoid errors in its performance; and
- (C) the employee was sufficiently trained and experienced with regard to the function and routine for its performance that reliance upon such employee represented the exercise of due care.

A successful petition under 37 CFR 1.378(b) under the circumstances presented would require petitioner to establish that Mr. Adamowski and Mr. Claus, to whom the clerical error is attributed, were sufficiently trained and experienced relative to the docketing of the maintenance fee payment schedule so as demonstrate that reliance on them represented the exercise of due care. Petitioner offers only sparse details as to the business routine in place for ensuring accurate data entry and maintenance of the data. If petitioner's chooses to file a renewed petition, it must be accompanied by comprehensive and exhaustive evidence that supports petitioner's contention that a clerical/docketing error resulted in the unavoidable delay in paying the 7.5-year maintenance fee.

It is noted that petitioner states that the assignee is a small corporation with limited staff and apparently limited resources. Petitioner intimates that there was not in place an organized docketing and clerical apparatus responsible for docketing the maintenance payments. Petitioner will note, however, that is reasonable to expect that petitioner would have established some kind of docketing system by which to track the payment of maintenance fees and that this task would have been delegated to a person who was familiar with the governing rules and time frames for payment of the maintenance fee. The apparent lack of any organized docketing system or trained employee implies imprudence relative to the maintenance of

patent and belies petitioner's contention that the delay in payment of the maintenance fee was unavoidable. Petitioner is required to address this matter in any renewed petition filed.

Petitioner's Current Options

I. Petitioner may file a request for reconsideration.

If reconsideration of this decision is desired, a petition for reconsideration must be filed within TWO (2) MONTHS from the mail date of this decision.⁸ The petition for reconsideration should be titled "Petition for Reconsideration under 37 CFR 1.378(b)." Any petition for reconsideration for this decision must be accompanied by a non-refundable petition fee of \$400.00 as set forth in 37 CFR 1.17(h).

After a decision on the petition for reconsideration, no further reconsideration or review of the matter will be undertaken by the Commissioner. It is, therefore, extremely important that petitioner supply any and all relevant information and documentation with the request for reconsideration. The Commissioner's decision will be based solely on the administrative record in existence. Petitioner should remember that is not enough that the delay was unavoidable; petitioner must prove that the delay was unavoidable. A petition will not be granted if petitioner provides insufficient evidence "to show" that the delay was unavoidable. If a request for reconsideration is filed, it must establish that the entire delay in the submission of the maintenance fee was unavoidable.

II. Petitioner may request a refund of the maintenance fee and surcharge which accompanied the petition.

Petitioner may request a refund of the maintenance fee and surcharge by writing to the Office of Finance, Refund Section, Commissioner for Patents, Washington, DC 20231. A copy of this decision should accompany petitioner's request.

Further correspondence with respect to this matter should be addressed as follows:

By mail: Commissioner for Patent
Mail Stop Petitions
Box 1450
Alexandria, VA 22313-1460

By facsimile: (571) 273-8300
Attn: Office of Petitions

A reasonable and prudent person would not rely on maintenance fee reminders from the Office for two reasons. First, the Office has indicated that such reminders are a mere courtesy and has reserved the right to discontinue such reminders at any time. second, such reminders may be lost in the mail. A reasonable and prudent person, in regard to his most important business would not rely solely on reminders that the Office may or may not send which may or may not be lost in the mail.

⁸No extension of this two-month time limit can be granted under 37 CFR 1.136(a) or (b). This is not a final agency action within the meaning of 5 U.S.C. § 704.

Telephone inquiries concerning this decision should be directed to the undersigned at (571) 272-3222.

/Kenya A. McLaughlin/

Kenya A. McLaughlin
Petition Attorney
Office of Petitions